

HOTSHOE



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SIMON ROBERTS

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All images © Simon Roberts















PORTFOLIO

HS: HOTSHOE
SR: SIMON ROBERTS

HS: How did you become interested in Photography?

SR: My earliest connection with photography was the sporadic Sunday afternoon slideshow sessions we had at home when my Dad, a keen amateur photographer, presented his recent Kodachromes. Whilst I studied photography at school, my academic career began with a degree in Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, before taking up photography seriously in 1997 after graduating, studying photojournalism. Geography has been a constant grounding to my work. The question of how photographs are important to the construction of senses of place has informed my practice, where I'm interested in exploring the idea that landscapes need to be decoded to gain an understanding of the complicated cultural terrain where contrasting and sometimes conflicting versions of national identity are played out.

HS: How would you describe the character of London?

SR: I was born in South London and spent the early part of my youth there before moving out to the Surrey commuter belt. During this period London was a teenage weekend hangout before finally becoming home in 1997, when I spent the next decade living "south of the river" (Stockwell). I now live in Brighton, an easy commute from the capital and am able to dip in and out of the city's cultural life. As a result, London has taken on various different forms over the years and is a place I both love, and sometimes loathe. In more recent years I've felt that the city has lost some of its edge and become more sanitised as huge swathes of land are effectively being put into private hands, as quasi public-private spaces, and often securitised. I can identify with Ian Sinclair's latest book The Last London, which is an elegy for a London that is now over. A city where the artists, the homeless, the eccentrics are moving out, or being moved out thanks to global capital and political meddling, which have conspired to bring about, "a strategic destruction of the local", Sinclair concludes.

HS: Since completing your series Motherland your work has focused on British identity. What is it that keeps you interested?

SR: It's curious that despite its being one of the oldest, most densely settled and heavily portrayed countries in Europe, writers and artists still go in search of Britain as a nation. This perhaps reflects Britain's post-imperial predicament, the complications of immigration, UK devolution, particularly the resurgence of a confident, forward-looking, flag-waving Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and now the outcome of Brexit. The past decade has seen debates around British identity only become more pronounced and sharpen in focus, thereby providing the motivation for me to keep making photographs exploring this period of upheaval.

HS: Can you explain your series?

SR: In essence, I've spent the past decade photographing events and places across Britain that have drawn people together in public, communal experiences. This apparent desire for common presence and participation and the need to share a sense of belonging, suggests something distinctive about our national character and identity. Whilst my interests have often gravitated towards evolving patterns of leisure, and the consumption and commodification of history, I've also chosen to photograph events and places that have a more immediate, topical significance in the turning of our recent history, and

which — summoning the sense of a national survey — collectively form a visual chronicle of the times in which we live.

Within this extended survey of work, London has been a place that I've continued to return to, given that our capital city is where people tend to congregate whether that's to celebrate, protest or socialise. My photographs in the city have covered political campaigning, royal celebrations, mass public protests, state funerals, religious gatherings, world sporting events or just everyday social events in a park. The most recent photograph I took in London has been one of the hardest, where I chose to document the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster. Like many, I regard this building and the terrible loss of life as symbolic of an unjust social order: an emblem of a broken society.

HS: Can a landscape photograph be political?

SR: Most definitely. Historically the circulation of images of national landscapes have been part of a wider cultural movement that served to help create a British identity, and they are often used as a mirror for a nation. Just look at the British passport full of generic landscape scenes of reed beds, coasts, mountains and village greens that illustrate the mythic qualities of rural landscape, which in all corners of the UK still seem to present a popular national view.

I see landscape as primarily a social and political space. I've made use of the grand overview, recording people as formal patterns within the landscape. Where possible, each photograph situates the event in a pictorial vista from an elevated viewpoint, familiar from landscape painting. I use discreet distance to place the viewer on the edge of involvement. A vantage point which, in itself, has political connotations, in terms of perceptions of power associated with how the viewer surveys the photographs from a position of authority.

HS: Scale is an important aspect of your work. Do you feel that appearing in a print publication limits the impact of your images somewhat?

SR: No, not if it's published over a double-page spread! Nevertheless, there is an issue of scale, particularly when it comes to photographs being reproduced small on the page or in the case of web usage where a 72dpi JPG just doesn't project the same presence and opportunity to study details in the photograph as a print on the gallery wall does. I have the same issue when publishing books where I need to consider the physical size of the book (which can be expensive). However, I'm not interested in making simple, appealing photographs for an Instagram feed to be quickly liked. All my photographs deal with specifics — it's details and facts that matter. The photographs have to be read intently, spatially, figuratively. They are layered documents, which need time to contemplate.

Merrie Albion — Landscape Studies of a Small Island is published by Dewi Lewis Publishing and an exhibition of the work will be on show at Flowers Gallery London from 18 January 2018.

SIMON ROBERTS

A STRATEGIC DESTRUCTION OF

THE LOCAL